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Mainline churches exert quiet influence in national political arena, survey reveals

by James Solheim

(ENS) What happened to the public role of mainline churches? Has their influence dropped off the radar screen, perhaps because of the declining memberships? Did they run out of steam after playing a strong role in the civil rights movement of the mid-1960s? Or are they still active and influential, even if overshadowed by the prominence in the political arena of the Religious Right?

Those questions animated a three-year study of the political role of mainline churches and the results show strong evidence that, despite precipitous drops in membership, they still exert considerable influence in the national political arena.

Under the leadership of sociologist Robert Wuthnow, director of the Center for the Study of Religion at Princeton University, a dozen researchers took a close look at the six largest mainline denominations--United Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Episcopal, Presbyterian, American Baptist and United Church of Christ, with a combined membership of 22 million.

In its main conclusions, to be published by the University of California Press next year, the study said that "mainline churches have been doing a reasonably good job of working quietly, behind the scenes" and they have a positive view of their role, according to Wuthnow, who shared the results at a mid-March conference in Washington, DC. He said that "the mood in America's mainline churches is decidedly optimistic."

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Episcopal News Service.**Influence still strong**

One-third of the 5,603 people interviewed said that the public influence of their church is stronger than a generation ago, another third said that it is about the same, and "only 24 percent say it is weaker," Wuthnow said.

He also pointed out that "the mainline churches command significant financial and institutional resources," taking in more than \$11 billion annually. "Most significant, of course, are the 75,000 mainline congregations and the 72,000 well-trained clergy who serve these congregations," he added.

How do they use their resources? "We found that mainline congregations are much more likely than other kinds of congregations to sponsor programs for the wider community, such as soup kitchens, homeless shelters, or daycare centers, and much more likely to let other groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous or job-training programs, use their facilities," Wuthnow said in comments at the Washington conference. Members of mainline churches were also more likely to be active in the community.

Pattern of quiet influence

"Beyond the local level, mainline efforts also follow the pattern of quiet influence," Wuthnow continued. "Few members are aware of their denomination's Washington office, yet these offices have achieved small successes on a number of fronts," especially their participation in a coalition that recently got \$435 million from Congress for debt relief for the world's poorest nations.

"Largely unnoticed, mainline efforts have also been quite successful at bringing questions of justice into the vocabulary of the larger environmental movement, and in challenging threats to First Amendment freedoms," Wuthnow said.

Yet members of the mainline churches expressed reservations about the tactics of the Religious Right and with direct political activity of their clergy. And there are some issues where the comfort level changes.

One of the main reasons for the decline in church membership is the fact that only 24 percent of the population is now Protestant. This is a significant decline from the 40 percent in 1960.

The decline in church membership is also due to the fact that the Protestant church is no longer the dominant force in American society. This is due to the fact that the Catholic church has grown significantly since 1960.

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While there is widespread agreement that the struggles over the rights and role of gay and lesbian members are important, it has been painful for mainline members to watch and read about them in the newspapers. On the other hand, Wuthnow notes, "these questions are being discussed in churches, whereas they more often are simply being ignored in the wider society." The issues that are important to mainline churches also loom large on the public agenda--racial equality, gender equality, environmental justice, and non-violence.

The Rev. Jim Wind, a Lutheran who is president of the Alban Institute, observed that the mainline churches tackle an incredible range of issues and are committed to a big agenda, based on a deep commitment to the common good. That raises the potential for exhaustion, he added, because it is possible to be spread too thin.

In one of the workshops at the two-day conference, Wendy Cadge of Princeton said the controversy swirling in most churches over the role of gays and lesbians has benefited the larger society. "No American institution that I can think of has gone so long listening to opponents and proponents, and maintaining a range of perspectives," she said. Because of their commitment to maintain the dialogue, the churches have "granted legitimacy to all sides of the debate."

Serious challenges ahead

While "there is much to be thankful for, much to celebrate, and much that has worked well," Wuthnow warned that "there are also some serious challenges."

One of those challenges is "coming to terms with the growing role of federal government in America life," he said. "The main reason for this growth is that we live in a more complex, densely populated society now than in the past." While expecting services and protection from the government, "many of our local churches have turned inward. Members like the warm fuzzies they get worshipping with their friends. They could care less about national issues," he said.

As an example of the level of interest, Wuthnow said that in the same period the government has grown by 500 percent, support for Washington offices of the

churches has shrunk. "The mainline denominations now spend about a fifth of a penny on these offices for every dollar they spend elsewhere," he said.

The study concludes that the churches should engaged in "a serious reexamination of the role of the Washington offices. How should their priorities be established? Should they focus on many issues or only a few? Is their task primarily one of research, advocacy, or communication? How should they balance efforts in Washington with attempts to build bridges back to local congregations? What kinds of partnerships and coalitions should they create?"

Efforts by mainline churches to address issues of racial discrimination and injustice had been the least successful, according to the study. "Although the reasons for this are complex, a key factor seems to be an attitude of 'doing for' rather than 'doing with,'" Wuthnow said. The churches "need to think more seriously about partnering with African-American congregations and service organizations, working alongside them and learning from them," he said.

Wind agreed, arguing that an "anti-democratic elitism" in some mainline churches can be condescending, not accepting the possibility of everyone being agents of change in their own way. It is time to "look at the big picture of social change and shape new agendas and strategies."

A new era

After 200 years, Americans are still trying to make up their minds whether religion is strictly a private matter, said Washington Post columnist E.J. Dionne in his keynote address March 15. He also wondered if the sacred principle of separation of church and state is the separation of religion from public life.

"The wall between church and state may be under renegotiation," he said. Gone is the era of Protestant hegemony, when there was a "shared Protestant spirit with a commitment to religious toleration." He said that American society was in a stage now of growing secularization and a marginalization of religion, perhaps even a new prejudice against religion, as Stephen Carter of Yale argues.

Prof. John DiIulio, director of the White House Office

of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, reported that he had been involved in "a robust discourse" over the role of his office.

At the core of the debate is the question, "Under what conditions can we improve the lives of the nation's most disadvantaged. How should we support citizens who, out of religious conviction, seek to promote the well-being of our neediest neighbors?" Then the question becomes how we can use government support to meet social needs.

DiIulio said that President George W. Bush is convinced that the government should welcome faith groups as partners, not rivals, building on the vast array of social ministries operated by faith groups throughout the nation. "Those who serve the needy deserve more help," he said. Within constitutional limits, "government can and should find better ways to help them all into the public square, supporting their good work."

He said that "too many groups doing tremendous work at the local level have been left out."

Rep. Chet Edwards (D-TX) pointed out some of the dangers of new cooperation. "It will harm religion to let the government fund religion," he said during a panel discussion. Federal funding of church-run programs will lead to government oversight, he said. "Politicians have no business making decisions over which religious groups get funding" and could lead to competition over the funds. "It is impossible not to play religious favorites," he said. The direct use of tax dollars in churches is a "prescription for disaster."

Rep. Amo Houghton (R-NY) pushed back, pointing to the "tremendous need" and concluding that the new initiative was "worth a chance."

--James Solheim is director of the Office of News and Information for the Episcopal Church.

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